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ABSTRACT

Methods for second language vocabulary development in the intermediate and advanced level English classroom are described. Rather than require students to memorize lists of words, the teacher should give students a better understanding of the process of vocabulary development by showing them how to refine their use of new lexical items and implant those items in long term memory. The process of learning new vocabulary involves using contextual clues to guess the meaning of a word, using a dictionary, referring back to the dictionary, asking a native speaker to explain idiomatic or unclear usages, and using the word in a situation where errors can be corrected. Through such a process, the student will gain a more refined understanding of the words covered and learn that practice and reinforcement are more important than memorization in developing and maintaining vocabulary. (RW)

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AN AFFIRMATIVE APPROACH TO VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Jean Shioji

In time, theoretical and applied linguists may be able to provide us with a corpus of materials adequately categorizing and distinguishing each of the millions of lexical items in English. Until more linguistically valid materials become available, however, to help us define the meaning and predict the usage of large numbers of vocabulary items with greater accuracy, most teachers and students will have to work toward vocabulary development with the aid of available tools such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and reading texts, each useful in a specific but highly limited way.

Even if more precise tools were available, however, the classroom teacher would still face the challenge of making palatable the formidable task faced by the student--that of assimilating in a relatively short period of time an approximation of the number of items in the working vocabulary of the native speaker of English as well as the wide array of knowledge that the native speaker has about the frequency, register, collocation, and structural patterning of each of those vocabulary items.

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1. Materials Available and Lacking

The first but by no means the only problem faced by the teacher and student who are serious about vocabulary development is the scarcity of adequate materials. Previous writings have decried this lack and have outlined some of the criteria of good materials. Useful vocabulary development materials should not treat vocabulary items each in isolation but should introduce the student to the "semantic field" (Channell 1981) or to an array of synonyms and cognates (Nilsen 1976) which help the student both to remember the word and to differentiate it from similar ones. In such materials, grids and scales may be useful to point out to students differences between synonyms on such aspects as register or intensity of meaning (Channell 1981).

Advanced vocabulary teaching should also tackle the problem of collocation and should teach students to recognize the surrounding words and contexts within which a lexical item is commonly found (Brown 1974). Today computers can be used to identify commonly used words and their collocations, and from there the materials should set out for the student a representative sample of such collocations, which he is directed to notice and analyze before attempting his own active use of the lexical item (Mackay 1980).

As stated by Richards (1976: 83): "Knowing a word" means knowing "the degree of probability of encountering that word

in speech or in print," "the limitations imposed on the use of the word according to variations of function and situation," "the syntactic behavior associated with that word," "the underlying form of a word and the derivations that can be made from it," "the network of associations between that word and other words in the language," and "the semantic value of a word," among other things.

Clearly, this is a great deal to ask of our materials as well as to ask of teachers and students engaged in the task of vocabulary development. Even when and if such texts and reference works are made available for a substantial number of lexical items, the sheer enormity of digesting all that material may seem tedious or intimidating to most students. When faced with the difficulty of helping students to understand and remember so much information about each new word, teachers may also feel tempted to sacrifice quality for quantity and slip back into older practices of introducing students to larger numbers of vocabulary items in a more casual or cursory way.

While the development of better materials might not solve the pedagogical problem, the use of traditional materials such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and reading textbooks makes the teacher's role in guiding a student's vocabulary development even more crucial. We are all aware that dictionary definitions may confuse or mislead

the non-native speaker, and that most dictionaries provide very little of that vital information regarding when, where, how, why, and with what the word should be used in constructing sentences. In general, reading texts also focus mainly on helping the student recognize a word in one specific context and do not go far enough to help the student make that word part of his broader recognition or active use vocabulary.

An initial decision that must be made by the teacher and/or students at the time of selecting materials for a vocabulary program is where to strike the balance between quality and quantity in vocabulary study. The teacher should be sure the students are aware that a word inadequately learned may not be retained in the memory long at all and that therefore aiming solely at a great quantity of words may be a waste of time. Conversely, however, putting in the effort necessary to enable a student to actually use the new word correctly in his own sentences may not be the most effective use of time for those students without high academic goals. All students should be made to realize how a firmer grasp over vocabulary items can improve their ability to express themselves in writing, but it is yet a narrower goal to aim toward mastery of those words which will be needed specifically for the writing of reports, research, evaluations, and other academic purposes. (See Martin 1976 and Mackay 1981).

2. Procedures for Students to Follow

Vocabulary development is an active process which goes on throughout even the adulthood of the native speaker, long after his knowledge of syntax has become relatively fixed (Richards 1976: 78). The non-native speaker should be made aware that his task is much the same, only larger, and that to deal with his constant exposure to new vocabulary items, he needs to master an effective method of approach more than he needs to learn a certain number of words during the vocabulary development program. It is the teacher's job to emphasize effective procedures for tackling new words throughout the course, even if these procedures cannot be carried out with respect to all the new words encountered during that time period.

First, both teachers and students must accept the fact that vocabulary is not effectively learned or retained by sheer memorization of definitions, synonyms, or translations into the student's native language. Even the native speaker has had the experience, perhaps when pursuing academic goals, of seeing a new word, looking it up and trying to burn its definition into memory, only to have the word reappear a few weeks or months later and its meaning elude the learner's memory. Only by exercising the diligence to attempt to relearn the word at each encounter will the reader finally

make it a permanent part of his recognition vocabulary, although if its frequency of usage is low, it may always remain one of those items which the learner, if asked, can define only vaguely.

Once convinced that this sort of discipline, plus a good understanding of effective procedures and use of tools available, will eventually pay off far more than attempted memorization, the student may become willing to lessen his dependency on both the teacher and a specific set of materials and actively begin the acquisition of the particular sort of vocabulary needed to carry out the individual's own goals.

It helps to give the students some choice individually or as a group over the type of reading text or vocabulary materials to be studied, since that ability to choose may help them to maintain a higher level of interest in the materials. For purposes of this program, the teacher should take care not to allow students to pursue vocabulary used specifically in certain technical or professional fields; the vocabulary should be of the most general usage possible. After exercising careful judgment over the materials chosen, however, the teacher must then step back and show the students how to proceed on their own, always resisting the temptation to shoot out a definition in response to the student question: "What does this word mean?"

Instead, the teacher should react by shooting back a series of questions aimed at teaching the students to use their own eyes and minds. The first question may concern the form and function of the word in that sentence; students can use constant reinforcement of their understanding of the nexus between form and function in various types of sentences--even at an advanced level, they may tend to ignore the structural requirements on word form.

Secondly, the teacher should point out any clues to meaning available from the other words in the sentence or from syntax or punctuation. Few students recognize, for example, the importance of the preposition _from_ following a word such as _deter_, indicating the semantic similarity of _deter_ to words such as _stop_, _prevent_, and _discourage_, also taking the same preposition. Teachers who force students to verbalize contextual clues such as these time after time will be teaching far more than individual lexical items.

Once the teacher is satisfied that the more obvious contextual clues have been digested by the students as a first step toward uncovering the meaning of the target word, the next step is to insist that they follow up on their intuitions by referring to an authoritative source such as a good dictionary. It would not be productive to encourage students to merely guess at meanings from context and go on from there, since vast misunderstandings can result. Of

course, we are assuming here that the class time is now being devoted to vocabulary development as distinguished from reading skills because it is not a good idea to interrupt the flow of a reading exercise by asking the students to refer to a dictionary. Once this distinction in goals has been made clear, however, the insistence upon dictionary use is necessary to instill a habit of a disciplined approach to vocabulary acquisition as well as to supervise the students in the use of a tool which can easily be used improperly.

Most teachers introduce students to principles of dictionary usage at the beginning of a course, but unless the principles are discussed during actual practice throughout the semester, students' ability to use the dictionary accurately remains shaky. Even if the teacher has an orientation against the use of dictionaries, it is only through frequent exercise that the student can be made to understand for himself the pitfalls awaiting him in use of the dictionary. One common problem is that students looking in a dictionary for different forms of a word may find and accept certain highly unusual forms in place of the more common one. A student seeking the noun form of valiant, for example, might be encouraged by the dictionary to choose valiancy instead of using valor as the preferred noun form.

A larger problem is that many foreign students are genuinely inexperienced at discerning meaning from an

English language definition. Some dictionary definitions are very abstract; others are circular, defining the word by using other forms of the same word. Not many students have a strategy for working through such definitions until they reach some real kernel of meaning. Some students are also poor at determining which of several divergent meanings is the proper definition for the word in the context in which it was encountered, or they come away without an understanding of the predominant meaning that the word carries in the native speaker's mind. One student, for example, in looking up promiscuous got the idea that it meant excessive or uncontrolled behavior and then told the teacher that she assigned "promiscuous homework." Because the word had not been used in a sexual context in the sentence in which he had found it, he somehow overlooked the fact that its sexual connotation would greatly limit its use. Another sort of difficulty is simple carelessness--a student studies the definition of propriety where the word in the sentence was actually proprietary; another student insists that she found obese as the adjective form of obey.

Such confusions and inaccuracies crop up frequently enough to make a convincing argument that students should be given repeated practice in English dictionary usage and should be carefully guided and supervised by the teacher through a number of such exercises.

Next, the students should be taught to get in the habit of going back to the context or sentence in which they found the word. The first purpose for this is to check that the definition selected from the dictionary is correct in that context and to make sure that the students understand any overlays of meaning or nuance that the writer may have intended by the use of that word in that context. In an example mentioned above, the word promiscuous was found in a newspaper editorial criticizing a certain Senator's "promiscuous foreign policy." Students and teacher should discuss the fact that this is certainly not a common usage of promiscuous but that the word was deliberately chosen for its effect.

Where words are being used in more prosaic utterances, however, the teacher should direct the students' eyes to features of that word's collocations. Students should be asked to notice whether the word is used with a particular type of subject, object, verb, or preposition. Students should be encouraged to try to retain a memory of the word not as an isolated definition but as it fits into a certain configuration with other words in the sentence and more broadly as it relates to the idea being expressed. Of course, occasionally the expression cannot be understood by reference to definitions of individual words because the whole expression is an idiom. The teacher should make sure that students are able to recognize and deal with idioms

when they crop up in reading materials.

The final step should be to require the student to check his understanding of the word or expression with a native speaker. Of course, in the classroom situation the teacher is the native speaker who will check whether the student has gleaned a fair approximation of the meaning of the word through his examination of context and dictionary and his attempt to reconcile the two. But the teacher's goal is to wean the students from dependence on the teacher in such situations and to teach them a process by which in the future they can be sure of learning vocabulary well. Therefore, the teacher should set up certain exercises in which the student is expected to find another native speaker to answer his questions where the exact meaning of a word or expression cannot be discerned from the context or dictionary.

Students must be made aware that there are pitfalls in relying solely on untrained native speaker intuition in defining words. If a student asked almost any native speaker the meaning of the word mend, for example, the reply would probably be something like "fix or repair." Few native speakers would think to mention any limitations on its usage, and as a result many students, in attempting to make their own use of the word mend, would make a sentence such as *I'm taking my car to be mended.

The fact that such limitations are rarely made clear to the student from any source, as a result of the paucity of linguistically complete and accurate descriptions of the contexts or collocations in which a word will be found or not found, means that students should be wary of trying to use new words without guidance. Nevertheless, if one of the goals teacher and students have agreed on is to expand vocabulary partly in the interest of the students' ability to generate more interesting utterances, then an attempt to have students generate sentences using the new word based on perhaps incomplete information about its proper collocations will have to be made. When an entire class of students attempts to make sentences with a new word, enough accurate and inaccurate samples are generally produced to give the teacher an opportunity to analyze and explain to the class as a whole what unique properties of that word's semantic patterning were not clearly understood before the students' next attempt to use the word.

This sort of trial-and-error method, while cumbersome, is still perhaps the best method where adequate materials are not available to give the student a complete description of each word before he attempts to use it. Even if such materials were available, however, the step of trying to use the word in communication with a native speaker would still be an important part of the learning process. As

Richards (1976: 88) points out, much of the semantic strength of certain words is lost when the student encounters them solely on the written page and never has the real-life experience of hearing such words used to convey strong feelings in specific human situations.

In order to teach students how to approach the task of learning new vocabulary on their own, then, the teacher must guide them repeatedly through the following steps and be sure they understand the significance of each: (a) using contextual clues to guess at the meaning of a word, (b) using a dictionary to find the definition and word form information about the word, (c) referring back to the context to reconcile it with the dictionary definition and to look further for any significant collocational patterning which should be learned along with the word, (d) asking a native speaker to explain unclear or special idiomatic usages, and (e) attempting to use the word in a situation where the usage can be checked by a native speaker for accuracy and clarity.

3. Components of the Classroom Program

The process outlined above is obviously time-consuming and cannot be carried out with all new vocabulary. It is the teacher's initial task, therefore, to make the selection of which vocabulary items will be learned according to these

procedures. Only a relatively few words can be taught thoroughly each week, so the teacher should exercise careful judgment over the choice of words. Nevertheless, by following the suggested procedures with each group of words, the students will be learning the process by which they should attempt to learn words which become important to them in the future.

The teacher could select the words simply by looking over the week's reading assignment ahead of time with an eye toward finding vocabulary items which will lend themselves to some in-depth study but which will also be of the greatest use to the students in the future.

A teacher who uses some of the same reading materials in successive courses will find it highly practical to start building vocabulary units to supplement those materials. Experience with each group of students will give the teacher a greater pool of correct and incorrect utterances generated with each of the selected words, so that the teacher's awareness of what collocations to prepare the students for and which to warn them against for each word can continually sharpen.

The types of vocabulary items selected for study should not, in general, be concrete nouns or words related to one specific field of study or topic of conversation. Such words are easily learned and remembered by students

by perhaps using as little as a simple translation dictionary. What the teacher must aim for is vocabulary which is more abstract and not so easily grasped in translation, vocabulary expressing actions or concepts which might be utilized in any subject or topic area, and vocabulary which qualifies or quantifies other concepts. Thus, the word subtle would make a much more appropriate object of study than the word sewer; the latter word has some pragmatic usefulness but would not require a teacher's guidance for the student to understand, remember, and use effectively.

One considerable advantage to the teacher's selecting which words will be studied from the outset of the course is that those words can then be used in setting up a pre-test in vocabulary which the teacher can administer at the beginning of the course in order to ascertain whether the level of vocabulary chosen is appropriate for the level of student ability in general and also to distinguish which students may be stronger or weaker in vocabulary, as a diagnostic tool. The students feel good if assured that, although they missed a great many on the pre-test, they will be taught these same words as part of an organized vocabulary development program. When given the same or a similar test at the end of the semester, they feel proud

of being able to quantify their progress in terms of a concrete increase in their scores. Too often students taught vocabulary solely through a reading-book method do not get that same feeling of measured accomplishment.

Another role of the teacher in such a vocabulary development program is to point out to students the nexus between vocabulary and syntax. Students cannot use new vocabulary accurately without an understanding of syntactic patterning, and there are many syntactic patterns which cannot be mastered without an understanding of various lexical aspects. Perhaps the simplest example of this is the problem of word form. Many students consistently fail to use the form of the word required by its function in the sentence they produce. This is partly a grammatical problem; they may be unaware that a noun or gerund form is required after a preposition, for example. It is also a lexical problem; through lax or unskilled dictionary use they may be unable to find the noun form needed. Many students simply invent forms when they are unsure or where the needed form of a word simply does not exist. Students introduced to the word repugnant, for example, may try to change it into a verb: *He repugns vegetables.

The most useful form of a word to study is the verb, if a verb form is available. Verbs lend themselves to an analysis of participial forms, the concepts of transitive

and intransitive, and active and passive voice. These remain troublesome areas of grammar study for many students precisely because the syntactic and structural nexus is very close here. At a beginning level, students learn the passive by simply making transformations of active sentences in which they are already given the proper subject and object. It is a far different matter for advanced students to generate their own sentences using participles, objects, or passive voice correctly when they are trying to use new verbs whose transitive or intransitive character they are not fully certain of. This is not a problem to be discussed only in the abstract in the classroom; students must be given plenty of practice composing their own sentences. Some students, even though told that vanish is intransitive, will try to write a sentence such as: *The magician vanished the rabbit.

Prepositions are another example of an area where there is a close structural and lexical connection. New vocabulary cannot be taught without explicit recognition of what prepositions will be used with the word. Conversely, prepositions cannot be taught without reference to their idiosyncratic patterning with various lexical items. Teachers can do a far more effective job of addressing these various grammatical problems in their students' writing if they emphasize such points in each vocabulary lesson.

A vocabulary development program need not be all work and no play, however. Part of the teacher's job is to teach the students that vocabulary needs to be used frequently and in a variety of situations in order to become familiar and long-term members of one's vocabulary. Oral exercises should be set up frequently to encourage students to use the new words in their own speech as well as in their writing. This can easily be arranged in the form of communication games with other members of the class, such as asking each other personal questions using the new words. For a change of pace, games such as crossword puzzles and "Password" can be arranged using the target vocabulary. Team games such as vocabulary "bees" make an enjoyable way to review vocabulary before a test.

4. Conclusion

In summary, teachers and students at an intermediate to advanced level with a serious interest in vocabulary development should expect this endeavor to take a substantial investment of time and effort. While much vocabulary encountered in the course may continue to be handled with the usual cursory reading-book methods, a substantial number of truly useful vocabulary items can be taught thoroughly by means of a carefully selected and organized vocabulary program. Words pre-selected for their frequency of use and wide range

of applicability should be presented to the students in a format calculated to maximize their understanding and aid their memories, such as in a group of synonyms and antonyms expressing one basic concept or notion. In such groupings, students can be sensitized to subtle differences in meaning and usage among synonyms. The words should all be practiced in cloze exercises requiring the student to recognize the proper semantic context or collocation and to manipulate the form of the word to meet the structural requirements of the sentence. Finally, students should be asked to generate their own utterances with the expectation that improper usage will be analyzed as a means to better understanding the limits upon word usage. Constant oral and written reinforcement should be carried on throughout the course, with cumulative review and testing carried out at the end.

The students may remain far from knowing all the vocabulary of English, but they will be much better off for having learned a number of selected words well (as opposed to being more casually introduced to a greater number of words which cannot be fully assimilated), for having reached a better understanding of the nexus between syntax and vocabulary, and for having formulated a method of attack which will help them accurately ascertain the meanings and patterning of new words encountered in the future. They will be aware of the importance of refining their understanding of a word's precise

"meaning." They will be aware that adequate practice and reinforcement, not memorization, is the key to making a word a permanent member of their vocabulary. It is hoped that they will be able to use such awareness of the process of vocabulary learning to aid in the self-study they will do as they continue their academic pursuits or other occupations involving the English language.

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